SHAKESPEARE

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

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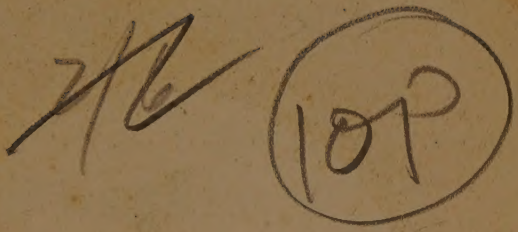

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BY

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THERE is one book in the world of which it might be affirmed and argued, without fear of derision from any but the supreme and crowning fools among the foolishest of mankind, that it would be better for the world to lose all others and keep this one than to lose this and keep all other treasures bequeathed by human genius to all that we can conceive of eternity—to all that we can imagine of immortality. That book is best known, and best described for all of us, simply by the simple English name of its author. The word Shakespeare connotes more than any other man's name that ever was written or

spoken upon earth. The bearer of that name was the one supreme creator of men who ever arose among mortals to show them and to leave with them an all but innumerable race of evident and indisputable immortals. No child of man and woman was too high or too low for his perfect apprehension and appreciation. Of good and evil, in all their subtlest and sublimest forms of thought and action and revelation, he knew more than ever it has been given to any other man to know. All this incomparable birthright might conceivably have been bestowed on a man from whom the birthright of song had by equitable compensation been absolutely withheld. But except upon the greatest of lyric and prophetic poets it has never been bestowed in ampler or more entrancing measure.

It cannot, or rather it must not, be denied that no promise of so great a future was given or was suggested by the first two booklets which presented to the world of readers the name of the greatest among all the writers of all time. There are touches of inspiration and streaks of beauty in 'Venus and Adonis': there are fits of power and freaks of poetry in the 'Rape of Lucrece': but good poems they are not: indeed they are hardly above the level of the imitations which followed the fashion set by them, from the emulous hands of such minor though genuine poets as Lodge and Barksted. And when we remember, as we cannot and should not choose but remember, how much of crudity as well as beauty we must needs recognize in 'Two Gentlemen of Verona', 'Love's Labour's

Lost', and the first rough sketch of 'Romeo and Juliet', we are compelled to admit that the name of their author, had he died and left behind him no other credentials than these, could hardly have been set by any competent judge beside that of the great young poet who had given to England and immortality the tragedies of 'Doctor Faustus' and 'Edward the Second'. In the first of these three plays there is some charm of humour, though the pleasantry is sometimes attenuated to the verge of inanition: in the second, with a good deal of forced and wire-drawn jocularity, there is likewise no lack of genuine fun and glorious poetry: in the third it is first of all to be remembered and lamented that Shakespeare should not or could not have followed the beautifully simple and exquisitely

pathetic narrative of Bandello instead of the inferior and adulterated version of the tale to which alone we can suppose him to have had access, and which by its perverse omission of the finest incident in the whole story has deprived us of what must and would have been the tenderest and noblest passage in the loveliest of all tragedies of love. The last words interchanged by the dying Romeo and Juliet, had Shakespeare given them utterance, could not but have been as perfect in beauty as the after attempt of a presumptuous mummer to supply them was ridiculous and revolting in its impertinent incompetence. But the text, long since cleared for ever of Garrick's hideous interpolation, remains liable to the objection of a scarcely less presumptuous pedant that the style or

tone of the lovemaking is unlike the natural language of actual lovers: as though the spoken as well as the written expression of feeling did not naturally rather than conventionally vary from age to age. Men of the renascence could no more be expected to talk like men of the middle ages—whether contemporaries of Dante, of Chaucer, or of Villon—than like men of our own age. Each century or so, if we accept the convenient and casual division of manners and of styles by the rough and ready reckoning of successive dates, has its own natural conventions of life and art, from which none can entirely escape but by servile affectation of an obsolete manner or fatuous affectation of an unnatural style. Margites Hallam, who knew so many things so badly, could not see this. The same explanation

rather than excuse is no less necessary for a fair and appreciative estimate of Shakespeare's first original and unaided attempt at dramatic chronicle or historic tragedy. Full as it is of flowing and fervent beauty, the effusive and elegiac style of 'King Richard II' is hardly more dramatic or lifelike in many of the scenes than the very earliest manner of Marlowe; and the treatment of character is less coherent and consistent than the great elder poet's. There are at least six consecutive lines in Greene's grotesque tragedy of 'Titus Andronicus' which are evidently interpolated by the young Shakespeare; whose early gift for serious or humorous imitation suffices to explain the rancour of the elder and minor poet. They are in the exact style of Greene, so glorified and trans-

figured as to be recognizable only by those who can see the gradations and shades of difference which distinguish a modest original from a superb imitation. It is less obviously easy to decide on the complicated question of Shakespeare's share in the singularly unequal trilogy of 'King Henry VI'. The comparatively few scenes in the first part which bear the impression of his prentice hand are sometimes in rhyme—crude enough here and there, but above the reach of those rhymsters whose 'jigging veins' were finally dried up by the superbly contemptuous derision of Marlowe—and sometimes in blank verse not always unworthy of that mighty master: the finest passage in the second is an evident and magnificent interpolation of Shakespeare's now almighty hand in its maturity of omni-

potence : the third, a very fine tragic poem in its original form, was slightly and greatly improved by the critical as well as poetical manipulation of Shakespeare. The concluding play of ' King Richard III ' is a more harmonious work of still youthful genius, in which there is but one elaborately finished figure among a crowd of powerfully designed sketches. Richard is Shakespeare's first great and perfect creation ; admirable as well as terrible in his brilliant and dauntless intelligence, his fiery versatility of humour and of spirit, his unity and variety of character and of gifts. For the first time in all the literature of the world we are confronted with a great as well as a greatly wicked man : even Aeschylus and even Sophocles could show us but an Aegisthus and a Creon : Richard could take

up such a couple of criminals in the hollow of his hand.

Six years before the publication of this history, five years before the first appearance of Shakespeare's name in print, a great dramatic poem had been issued from the press without the author's name, which remains and must remain for ever the most inscrutable riddle, the most interesting subject of debate among students of poetry, that ever chance or craft proposed for solution or conjecture. There is nothing quite so subtly and profoundly impressive, so charged with the sublimest effects of terror and pity, in any of Shakespeare's early plays, as in the tragedy of 'Arden of Feversham'. There is more in it of the tragic humour and terrible or tender insight which were his alone in the fullness and

perfection of their power than will be found in the very greatest work of the very greatest of his followers and disciples: and to say this is to say much indeed: but less cannot and must not be said. And no poet of the time but Shakespeare and Webster has shown so noble an instinct for elevating and purifying the character of women or of men whom the chronicles they followed with close and meticulous fidelity had presented as merely debased and contemptible criminals: while the villain whose abject and savage egotism is the mainspring of the tragic action can hardly seem to any competent reader the creature of any hand then engaged in creation but Shakespeare's. Assuredly there is none other known to whom it could be plausibly or even possibly assigned. If

it be not his, there was a greater than he in his youth at work for the tragic stage, whose very name has perished.

The delightful ' Comedy of Errors ' is the very crown and flower of the young Shakespeare's humorous and fanciful work. For the first time he had before him as a model the work of a great comic poet—a man of rare if rough and ready genius. He could not improve, as no other imitator—not even Rotrou and not even Molière—could improve, on the invention and construction of Plautus : but he has flavoured the fun with such an exquisite infusion of poetry as no other imitator could afford. And without breaking the bounds of broad comedy so far as to impair the harmony of his work he has introduced upon the unsentimental scene two figures of young lovers, a fervent youth and

a fugitive maid, round which he has thrown a musical gloriole of lyric and elegiac poetry beyond all reach or all aspiration of all other comic poets. Coleridge, his greatest and his all but incomparable commentator, calls this play his only attempt at farce: but surely 'Twelfth Night' is as much and 'Merry Wives of Windsor' much more of a farce than the 'Comedy of Errors'. And 'The Taming of the Shrew', adapted and improved from a brilliant and powerful comedy of unknown authorship, is not less farcical in the violence of its horse-play and the complication and evolution of its intrigue.

The tragical history of 'King John', though in many of its earlier scenes diffuse and rhetorical even to the verge of declamation and verbosity, shows in some points a distinct and decisive

advance in general grasp of character and temperance of treatment. Its hero, the noble and chivalrous Bastard, is the first example in Shakespeare's work of a type which found its final and crowning expression in the person of King Henry V: the humorous-heroic. The eponymous reptile is better drawn than his less venomous fellow in futility and ferocity, King Richard II: but the mother and child who fall victims to his currish cruelty are hardly on the whole as lifelike as the maturer and full-grown Shakespeare would have made them. But the last appearance of the maddened mother, who has had noble things to say in some of the previous scenes, is magnificent. The boy is no more comparable with a later boy of Shakespeare's begetting than is his mother with the mother of Coriolanus.

The first tragedy of ' Hamlet ', which as obviously belongs to the first period of Shakespeare as any of his other early plays, is as complete and effective from the dramatic no less than the merely theatrical point of view as the recast and transfiguration of the poem which set it for ever among the highest recorded works of man. From the familiar contemporary mentions and allusions and references which attest the very natural fact of its immediate and perhaps unequalled popularity we cannot but draw the obvious inference and realize the indisputable certainty that Shakespeare never wrote merely for the stage, but always with an eye on the future and studious reader, who would be competent and careful to appreciate what his audience and his fellow-actors could not. The perfect

Hamlet was so far beyond their apprehension that the lying rascals who published the first edition of its author's collected plays did not fear to strike out from the already published text the very finest and most important passage in the poem: whence we may infer to what a process of mutilation the plays first issued under their most inauspicious auspices must only too surely have been subjected. But 'Hamlet'—no thanks to them—'Hamlet' we have in the fullness of the glory with which the afterthought of its creator transfigured and endowed it. The greatest of Shakespeare's tragedies it is not: but it is not unintelligible that it should pass for such in general and traditional estimation. The infinite and imperishable charm of the leading character, in all its mystery and all its

actuality, is wider in the universal attraction of its appeal than that of any other among the creatures of the omnipotence of Shakespeare. Others may appeal more profoundly or more keenly to the imagination or the sympathy of particular students: but the reach of Hamlet's influence, the sway of Hamlet's empire, has always been and always will be wider than any of theirs.

As to which among so many matchless and unapproachable masterpieces may be Shakespeare's masterwork in tragedy or in comedy it is impossible for any critic or any poet, and impossible it would be if even some celestial chance could possibly send us a second Coleridge, to pronounce judgement with the decision of a final authority. But as to which among his historic and

patriotic plays or poems is the crowning and consummate masterpiece of the supreme poet there can be no possible question among any imaginable readers. The trilogy of 'King Henry IV' and 'King Henry V' would suffice to show, not that Shakespeare was the greatest poet, but assuredly that Shakespeare was the greatest dramatist and the greatest humourist of all time. The majestic and impassioned poetry of the graver scenes should not, if it is possible that it should not, be eclipsed or overshadowed in the sight of students young or old by the presence and the rivalry of the greatest comic figure that ever dawned upon the conception of the greatest comic poet ever born. And it is in a great historic and heroic trilogy that this matchless figure is set as in everliving relief by the deathless hand

which carved and coloured it. The multitudinous magnificence of variety in creation which makes it difficult if not impossible for any not immodest and irrational criticism to attempt an estimate of this trilogy can be compared with nothing else in poetry or in prose. That equal and perfect justice should have been meted out alike to Hotspur and to Hal is sufficient to prove the flawless equity, the impeccable intelligence, the illimitable sympathy and the infallible apprehension of noble nature and of living truth, which none need seek elsewhere but all may find in Shakespeare. From Bardolph down to Lord Bardolph, from Pistol down to Prince John, the radiance of righteousness distinguishes the judgement and the treatment of character which cast all other men's

into the shade. Shakespeare is himself alone: he could have taken up Homer in his right hand and Dante in his left.

In the third play of this trilogy he has unconsciously matched himself against a greater than Homer or than Dante. In all poetic or dramatic or patriotic literature there is nothing of its kind comparable with the 'Persae' of Aeschylus but Shakespeare's 'King Henry V', there is nothing that can be set against the tragedy which revolves round Agincourt but the tragedy which is based on Salamis. As Shelley so justly saw and so admirably said, the comic humour of Shakespeare supplies the place filled and affords the relief given by lyric poetry in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles. And here above all is this the case: and here above all is the harmony of tragedy and

comedy most manifest and most perfect. The poetic chivalry of treatment, the fine sympathy and the full goodwill displayed towards 'that sweet enemy, France', could not have been excelled by Philip Sidney's very self. The shafts of sunbright raillery aimed at the sanguine self-confidence and joyful self-esteem of the French are no more tipped with poison or edged with malevolence than the kindly and faithful satire, if satire indeed we may call it, levelled at the sturdy assurance and stolid rectitude of the typical English plebeian. How far above all taint of provincial prejudice was the patriotism of the supreme Englishman may be seen by his thumbnail sketches of the stoutly taciturn Scot and the irritably voluble Irishman—good soldiers and good fellows both of them: but the

homely Welsh captain is as perfect and as cordial a study as any of all the living figures that serve so gloriously to set off the great eponymous type of the ideal hero, the ideal humourist, and the ideal king.

In the bright and boisterous farce called 'Merry Wives of Windsor' the reappearance of Falstaff and Mrs. Quickly is hardly as plausible as it is certainly amusing: and even as a picture of provincial manners in Shakespeare's time it can hardly be set beside the delightful scenes in which the genuine Shallow had enjoyed the somewhat costly privilege of introducing the genuine Falstaff to the humours and the comforts of country life. Did it not remind us of something so much better than its best, no one would wonder that the author of so good

a Plautine sort of play should have found it worth while—worth Shakespeare's while—to rewrite and to relieve it with a touch or two of poetry such as none could have spared but he.

So brilliant an early example of broad comedy as the anonymous old 'Taming of a Shrew' must excite an interest and a curiosity as to its unconjecturable authorship only less keen than theirs who stand for ever baffled and bewildered before the insoluble difficulties presented by the kindred problem in regard to so noble an early example of high tragedy as 'Arden of Feversham'. But in this case there is, for English if not for foreign students, no question possible of its attribution to the hand of Shakespeare. The artificial accent of the blank verse, and the stiff servility of imitation which

marks it as the work of a humbly ambitious and feebly industrious disciple of Marlowe, would suffice to set that question at rest. But though Shakespeare has in some degree toned down the somewhat rough and broad brutality of the original humour, he has rather refined than improved on it: or at least he has improved on it only by a process of refinement in detail rather than in principle. And he has not only struck out one or two fine touches of living humour, he has cancelled the whole of the admirable conclusion or dramatic epilogue which is morally and dramatically necessary to complete and to harmonize the work as a comic poem. It is hardly credible even of his editors that the unscrupulous imbecility of their impudent arrogance in tampering with his text should

have ventured to suppress his recast of it ; they were ready enough to garble and mutilate the sweetest and sublimest passages of his poetry, but they would hardly have dared or desired to make away with such a final if not such a necessary stroke of consummating comedy and crowning stage effect. To the underplot of this play due justice has never perhaps been done : it undoubtedly belongs rather to the comedy of bustle than the comedy of intrigue : but in the wide world of dramatic art there is room for both kinds below the higher station of the comedy which lives and requickens, survives or revives, by grace of humour or by force of character.

The subject of ' All 's well that ends well ', however full of dramatic or emotional suggestion and scenic promise

or possibility, is hardly so fit, perhaps, for theatrical as for narrative treatment. A curious and interesting short story in which not one of the leading agents can arouse any just or serious or healthy sympathy may serve well enough for the rather idle amusement of half an hour, but can hardly suffice for the groundwork of such a play as Shakespeare might have given us, had it pleased him to seek a subject elsewhere. As it did not, we can only be thankful for the pathetically fascinating poetry, and yet more for the farcically magnificent comedy, which give the play we have a memorable and distinguished station in the second rather than in the third class of Shakespeare's works. And if Helena is hardly worthier than Bertram of any sympathetic interest, the beautiful figure of his

mother is enough to raise and to redeem the ethical tone or impression of the poem and the play.

A single happy and ever blessed year, the last of the sixteenth century, saw the appearance in immortal print of three among Shakespeare's masterpieces. 'The Merchant of Venice' is perhaps the greatest and most perfect example of tragi-comedy on record. The tragic figure of Shylock, less sinned against than sinning, is thrilled and vivified by comic as well as terrific touches of character and emotion. His incontinence of lamentation and of rage is not less grotesque than piteous: his atrocity outweighs the balance of his injuries. But here as always Shakespeare is ahead of all men: his plea for righteousness, his claim for manhood, his appeal for charity, could not

have been so keen, so profound, so durable in the final impression of their force if they had been put into the mouth of a good Jew, a moral and sentimental sufferer, as now that they find fierce and tigerish utterance from the bloodthirsty lips of a ravenous and murderous usurer. That truth should speak through Shylock was a conception beyond reach of any other dramatist or poet that ever lived. And apart from this dark and splendid central figure, which disappears only to make way for the loveliest imaginable scene of laughter and of love, the charm of the whole poem is actually greater than even the interest of it. Every figure is in its way equally winsome: every scene of laughing prose or smiling poetry is equally delightful.

There is less of dramatic romance

and poetic attraction in the incomparable comedy of 'Much Ado about Nothing': but it is, in that kind, the crowning work of Shakespeare. In high comedy he never surpassed the perfection of the two figures which at once gave to the play in common parlance the name of 'Benedick and Beatrice': in broad comedy he never exceeded the triumphant and transcendent humour which glorifies with loving laughter the names of Dogberry and Verges.

'A Midsummer Night's Dream' is outside as well as above all possible or imaginable criticism. It is probably or rather surely the most beautiful work of man. No human hand can ever have bequeathed us anything properly or rationally comparable with this. Beauty pure and simple as the

spring's ' when hawthorn buds appear ' informs every verse with life as lovely and as happy as the life of flowers when ' every flower enjoys the air it breathes '. The lyric part is hardly and only lovelier than the rest because the lyric is of its very nature the sweetest and most perfect form of poetry. The fresh and matchless fragrance of Shakespeare's inborn and everliving and ever present lovingkindness imbues with something of April life the very interludes of farce. Were this the one surviving work of Shakespeare, his place would still be high in the first order of poets : but all words fall short of our thanksgiving when we remember that the same hand which gave us this gift gave us likewise ' Othello ' and ' King Lear '.

In ' Twelfth Night, or What you will '—a work of pure enchantment

which apparently owes its second title to the poet's conscious or unconscious reminiscence of a brilliant rather than satisfactory comedy by Marston—the fusion of broad and bright Rabelaisian fun with sweet and ripe Shakespearean poetry has given us something not less unique and only less delightful than the loveliest dream that ever lived in the living light of song. The double-sexed figure of the adorable Viola-Cesario was the spiritual parent—we can hardly say father or mother—of a somewhat over-copious generation of she-pages, beginning with the still more famous and popular Bellario-Euphrasia of Beaumont and Fletcher. But the humane rather than inhuman humour which distinguishes the comic genius of Shakespeare, even when revelling and running riot in the wildest of practical

jests and the most extravagant of outrageous hoaxes, from the sometimes brutal and almost ruffianly fun of even such great contemporaries as Ben Jonson or Beaumont and Fletcher, is negatively if not positively manifest in all those ever delicious scenes which make us happy in the joyous company of Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, Maria Lady Belch, Malvolio, and Feste the jester.

The author of 'As you like it' had before him two memorable models: but neither Lodge's 'Rosalynde' nor the fine old 'Tale of Gamelyn' can now be said to exist in human memory except as raw material for one of the most flawless examples of poetic and romantic drama, interwoven rather than inlaid with half divine realism or naturalism in humour, that ever cast its charm upon eternity. There is something

almost akin to fairyland in the merely human fascination of the characters and the story. And if there is also something questionable, if we may not venture to call it objectionable, in the rapid and facile transformations of character from atrocity to penitence and from tyranny to asceticism which serve to wind up the action so comfortably and so suddenly, so instantly and so easily, it is only by a somewhat ungrateful though hardly perhaps over confident reader that any very grave or serious protest could be raised against it. And yet, even in the half heavenly forest of Arden, even in a sweeter pastoral world of fancy-fed imagination than that of Theocritus himself, we cannot but feel that something of a breach is made in the natural law of moral instinct by the mere prospect of

union between the very vilest of intending fratricides and the very sweetest of sisterly friends. Even fairyland has its ethics: and we are here but half-way to fairyland.

The same ethical fault, if ever such fault may reluctantly and diffidently be found with any work of Shakespeare's, might be found with another masterpiece as far remote from this in tone and atmosphere as the depth of midnight from the height of noon. The great indefinable poem or unclassifiable play which bears the surely half satirical title of 'Measure for Measure' stands too high by right of might in tragic impression to be seriously impaired or vitiated even by the moral flaw which induced even Coleridge to blaspheme. It is undeniable that for such monsters of base and abject atrocity as Oliver

and Angelo a lifelong seclusion from intercourse with the humanity they dishonour would be the irreducible minimum of the penalty demanded rather than deserved by their crimes of intention and of action. But this moral defect in the equity of dramatic art which for once or for twice brings down Shakespeare as a playwright to the ethical level of Fletcher is not a more serious dereliction in the dark and deep tragedy of the graver play than in the pastoral romance of 'As you like it'. And apart from this entirely subordinate question there can be no doubt and no denial of the obvious truth that 'the true tragedy' of human life and character never found more glorious expression or more terrible exposition than in the tragic scenes of this magnificent if not faultless comi-

tragedy. It is not the least among the miracles wrought by the almighty hand of Shakespeare that it should have been able to create one of the supreme glories of all poetry, one of the crowning examples which testify to his transcendent power, out of the shameful agony of a shameless coward in face of nothing more terrible than death. Too sublime for attraction, too severe for fascination, Isabella is yet not only 'one of Shakespeare's women' but one of his noblest and most memorable. Some injustice has been done to her excellent duke by critics who condemn or deride him as a busybody on the score of his rather theatrical satisfaction in the sensational conduct of his detective business: he is on the whole a not unrighteous or ignoble justicer, and not unworthy to redeem the heroic

object of his admiring affection from the threatened stagnation of a cloister. But, superb as is all the tragic part of this unique and singular play, it can be questioned only by the most questionable of moralists that the comic part, lit up as it is by rare occasional flashes of Shakespearean power (with a streak in it of Jonsonian brutality), is generally far less humorous as well as less good-humoured than usual, and decidedly not less gross than the kindred scenes of brothelry in a play to which they can have been contributed by no feebler hand than Shakespeare's.

The second of the only two doubtful plays ever ascribed to Shakespeare came out a year before the piratical publication of 'Troilus and Cressida', 'Pericles', and the Sonnets. 'A Yorkshire Tragedy' does not at any rate

belong to the class of obviously spurious plays which it is impossible for any Englishman other than an incurable dunce to associate even in thought with the incomparable name of Shakespeare. Its tragic brutality is more repellent if not revolting than the comic brutality of Jonson at its worst. But the simple power of touch, the straightforward mastery of hand, can hardly perhaps be matched by any other man's we know. The ghastly and inhuman subject might possibly if not probably have been attempted by the author of 'A Woman Killed with Kindness': but the critic who could attribute this fearful little play to Heywood might as plausibly assign the authorship of 'The Inn Album' to Longfellow. This is not to say that I believe it to be Shakespeare's: indeed

I would rather think that impossible : but impossible I cannot quite bring myself to feel comfortably assured that it is. The all but insoluble question involved in the problem is whether Shakespeare at the height of his powers would or could have taken as the subject of even a slight and rough-hewn bywork or study in stark-naked realism the case of a murderous monomaniac or criminal lunatic, as we now should define him ; of a demoniac, or sufferer under the possession of an evil spirit incarnate in his flesh, as in Shakespeare's time they would have accounted him, and as in his last agony he assumes himself to have been.

That Shakespeare should have chosen so singular a subject as that of his last English historic play is not stranger than that he should have handled it in

so singular a fashion. From the opening to the close we are conscious of a certain defect in dramatic harmony of conception and poetic unity of action. The style of 'King Henry VIII' is unmistakably earlier than that of his last and greatest historic or tragic period; as rhetorical and effusive—'with a difference'—as that of 'King John' in many scenes of either play. The obvious metrical resemblance of more than a few passages to the versification of Middleton and of Fletcher is not exactly or conclusively sufficient to establish as rationally acceptable the assumption that Fletcher could have written the death-scene of Queen Catherine; or, indeed, the nobly and passionately eloquent scenes which set before us the death of Buckingham and the fall of Wolsey. Nor, for that

matter, has Fletcher, whom his own generation preferred to Shakespeare as a painter or creator of women, left us as subtle and significant a study of female character as the finely finished and ambiguously attractive sketch of Anne Boleyn. But for the full and proper purpose of historic drama there should have been a second if not a third part to set before us the high patriotic action and the unlovely personal degeneration into passionate if not inhuman and reckless if not ruthless tyranny of 'the majestic lord who broke the bonds of Rome' and fortified the independence of England on shore by the supremacy of England on the sea.

The insolubly enigmatic 'history of Troilus and Cressida' belongs likewise beyond all question to the penultimate

period of Shakespeare's work. For the second and last time it is impossible to conjecture why a play of his designing begins as it does to end where it does. In fact, the close of 'King Henry VIII' is almost harmonious and satisfactory if compared with the cynically abrupt and dramatically inexplicable upshot of 'Troilus and Cressida'. Nor is there any sufficiently sustained interest either of action or of character to make amends for this rather serious defect or obliquity of design. The union and disunion of a violently hysterical young amorist and a congenitally changeable young wanton, both equally hot of blood and weak of heart, could never have seemed to any tragic poet a proper subject or groundwork for a tragic poem: but out of this most inadequate and unattractive material Shakespeare

has been pleased to fashion some of the most glorious poetry in the world: from this unpromising point of departure he has swerved aside and forged ahead so as to attain and to comprise within the strange scheme of his poem a philosophy as sublime in its truth as Hamlet's. This is as much as to say, what no rational reverence can deny, that the keynote of the dramatic poem, the keystone of the spiritual structure, is radically and indisputably cynical. Alone among Shakespeare's plays, it lives among the great works of the world by the right and might of only such individual scenes and passages as no other man could have given us. The majesty, the magnificence, the depth and breadth of creative thought, the height and reach of interpretative imagination, which inform and inspire

the matchless music of the verse, can only be duly acknowledged by forbearance from all attempt at critical definition or articulate recognition of their peculiar quality or their immanent presence.

It must nevertheless be admitted by all students of normally healthy organs and tolerably cleanly instincts that there are too many passages in this abnormal if not amorphous masterpiece more discomfortable and even repugnant to natural taste and relish than the daring and admirably realistic scenes which have given an inheritance of ill fame among ignorant or prurient dunces to the name of 'Pericles, Prince of Tyre'. This evident recast or partial transfiguration of some earlier and homelier play belongs, as far as the work belongs to Shakespeare, to his

final and consummate period of incomparable achievement. In simplicity, in sublimity, in purity of pathos and in harmony of impression, it is above comparison with any but the greatest of its author's other works. The Homeric tragedy and terror of the storm, the Virgilian tenderness and fragrance of floral and musical tribute from a maiden mourning for the dead, the vivid and noble pathos of reunion between a forlorn father and a heroic child, could have been given as here they are given by Shakespeare alone, and by Shakespeare only at the very height and consummation of his most human when most superhuman power.

That power, clothed often in words of matchless charm and verse of matchless music, informs with immortality the greater part of the Sonnets of

Shakespeare : all indeed, we may say, but a very few of a lighter and a slighter sort among the whole melodious number. They are not to be and indeed they cannot be read as a regular sequence composing one great poem of passionate emotion after the likeness of Sidney's unequalled ' Astrophel and Stella ' : but no province or division of Shakespeare's work is proportionately richer, even to overflowing, in supreme and ever memorable lines and passages and phrases impossible to any but one man's hand on record. No better and saner or more rational and reverent commentary on the entire text can be imagined or desired than that which accompanies the marvellously faithful, careful, and inspired version of François-Victor Hugo ; the incomparably gifted and the incomparably devoted

translator of all and more than all Shakespeare's actual or possible work. The little poem subjoined to the Sonnets, 'A Lover's Complaint,' has two superbly Shakespearean lines in it which any competent reader's memory will naturally and gratefully detach from their setting and reserve for his delight. Of that impudent imposture called 'The Passionate Pilgrim' it would here be as impertinent and as improper to speak as of the very worst and vilest rubbish ever paraded among the ragged regiment of the spurious plays.

'One star differeth from another star in glory': but he must be an over-daring astronomer who would venture to prefer any one of Shakespeare's three great romantic plays to either of its rivals. The 'Winter's Tale' is as

unique among poems as is Shakespeare among men : the tragedy, the comedy, the pastoral fusion of them both, the heavenly harmony of the close, are all alike beyond all expression of praise. And from Homer's day to Hugo's there has been no such loving and faithful picture of a child as Shakespeare has given in the tragedy with which it opens. ' To see his nobleness ! '—the ejaculation of his criminally lunatic father, which redeems from the damnation of absolute abhorrence the only serious study of jealousy which Shakespeare ever deigned to take of so base a moral infirmity or vice—must always be the mental epitaph inscribed on the memory of every man born competent to read Shakespeare. But the tragedy which closes with the death of the child is too nearly ' hateful ' and dreadful to

be Shakespearean : the atmosphere of insane atrocity which pervades it, and from which only the passionate and heroic figure of Paulina emerges defiant and unhurt, is too painful to be nothing more or worse than tragic. No change could ever possibly have brightened and refreshed it but only the change to such a wealth and glory of sunshine as only the spirit of Shakespeare could have shed, and only the genius of Shakespeare could have ventured to flood the tragic and stormy stage with. There is no such pastoral poetry, such pastoral drama, in the world. The harmony of sweet prosaic realism and sweeter poetic passion is so absolute and perfect that it only gains instead of losing by the sudden change of weather to passing storm-wrack of cloud and threatening wind of ravage.

And the music that recalls a far happier Alcestis from the semblance of death to the reality of motherhood is the closing note of such a divinely human and naturally superhuman melody as no touch but one musician's could leave to vibrate for ever in the ear of the spirit.

But yet there is a somewhat deeper note struck in the companion poem of 'Cymbeline'. Though Perdita may be the sweetest of all imaginable maidens, Imogen is the most adorable woman ever created by God or man. Her single figure might well suffice to distinguish its designer as the supreme creator of imaginative life in human and immortal character. The woodland scenes of kindly and loving sisterhood in brotherhood with her unknown brothers touch a sweeter and a stranger

chord of interest than any other of a comparable sound in the whole world of poetry. That these should not be out of tune or keeping with the rest of the poem is proof enough of its right to be ranked among the great works of Shakespeare. But it has other claims than this to that matchless honour: the subtly consistent and credible figure of the heartless and fearless villain to whom life and death and men and women are merely shadows or puppets to be played with or played upon by the intelligence and the daring of an evil spirit: and the natural opposite and corresponsive personality of the trustful if indiscreet husband whose rather undignified if not unworthy kind of confidence degrades him to the acceptance of a wager on the honour of his wife which doubtless does not debase

him to the level of a Leontes, but does as decidedly indicate his difference in kind from a nature so nobly and congenitally incapable of jealousy as Othello's.

The third romantic play that Shakespeare lived to finish may have been conceived if not written earlier or later than the others: it is enough for us to recognize that each of this human triunity is coequal with its fellows. The 'Tempest' is distinguishable from 'Cymbeline' and the 'Winter's Tale' by the stronger and more serious intervention of magical or supernatural activity. Among countless other claims on our special and wondering gratitude, it has the charm of evoking a reminiscence and provoking a comparison which one poet alone could endure. The gentle and joyful fancy which

made fairyland of earth in the 'Midsummer Night's Dream' of youth is here transfigured into the passionate and thoughtful imagination of a maturer and a mightier demi-god or man. The difference of the later and the earlier poem is the difference between Ariel and Puck.

The first in apparent date of Shakespeare's Roman tragedies, if the seeming evidence of style may be accepted as conclusive, is not merely great at all points beyond comparison with other men's most triumphant work: it sets before us the one man of Shakespeare's making who stands high above all his fellows in sublime simplicity of innate and inevitable heroism: no mediaeval knight or king, as the American detractors who so absurdly reproach him with what they call feudalism would

lead their dupes to expect: a republican and a tyrannicide. The faultless and ideal figure of Marcus Brutus as painted by William Shakespeare shines out for all time in serene and superb disproof of the doubtless reasonable as well as plausible belief that the perfect heroism of perfect humanity must needs be unattractive if not repellent to the instinctive sense or apprehension of average and inferior mankind. No lesser poet has ever succeeded—in other words, no other poet will ever succeed—in making a blameless hero at once credible by human belief and loveable by human infirmity. But the infinitely thoughtful tenderness of Shakespeare's Brutus is as manifest and as characteristic as his heroic endurance of sorrow and his noble capacity of wrath. And the not so blameless Cassius is so

naturally worthy to stand beside him and set him off that we must forgive many shortcomings and offences to the later poet who so manfully avowed himself, at the height of his lesser glory and his inferior triumph, awed even to a just despair at the remembrance of these godlike Romans.

There is little enough of godlike or of good revealed in human character by the exhibition of the two leading or dominant figures in the less historic and more imaginative tragedy of 'Macbeth'. This great and terrible masterpiece of poetry or creation gives proof enough how independent of the interest excited by imaginative sympathy with virtue the inner action and passion of a great poem, if so it should please a great poet, may indisputably be. The figures of Banquo and Macduff, compared with

those of Lady Macbeth and her criminal victim, make little more mark on our memory than the figure of Malcolm or of Ross. But the resolute and dauntless atrocity of the one wicked woman to whom Shakespeare has ever accorded the honours of heroism fascinates with the black magic of witchcraft implied in the original sense of the word fascination the conscience and the compassion, if not the reason and the sympathy, of all average manhood. Her touch of belated pity for the husband she has enthroned and destroyed half humanizes the indomitably impenitent murderess who is no more susceptible to the impression of imaginary terrors than impervious to the touch of natural remorse. Mrs. Arden's too late regret is rather theatrically pathetic than morally convincing: Lady Macbeth's

incapacity for repentance is the inevitable complement, or rather, perhaps, the logical consequence, of her instant imaginative readiness to leap at the suggested bait which tempts her to play the part of the temptress, and eclipse with a word the temptations and suggestions of the witches. The wild overture or prelude to the action, which brings us face to face in storm and wilderness with the only creatures of human imagination as great or almost as great in potency of terror as the Eumenides of Aeschylus, strikes a note so high in fancy and so deep in presage that the homely if not almost vulgar realism of their first reappearance must wellnigh revolt as well as perplex the instinct and the mind of the normally attentive and impressible reader. The effect of this evidently intentional

change of note is surely rather jarring than convincing: it seems too great and strange a transmutation and a downfall that the prophetic agents of a doom sublime enough to change the face of kingdoms and destroy the souls of heroes should be found begging chestnuts and killing swine. Middleton's witches would disdain such work: it is hardly worthy of the village crones rather photographed than painted by Heywood, by Dekker, and by Ford. If designed to bring the existence of these incarnate mysteries closer to the vision and the conviction of contemporary readers or spectators, the method is surely rather coarse and obvious: especially as their subsequent bearing is always poetically and magnificently harmonious in consistency of tragic impression, unimpaired if not intensi-

fied by the high fantastic realism of occasional detail which deepens rather than degrades the visionary assurance of its truth.

But no supernatural effect of tragedy and of terror can ever equal or approach the effect of purely natural causes which work out their inevitable and unimaginable results by dint or by grace of no more incognizable influence than that of character and circumstance alone. 'Macbeth' is not more surely above comparison with 'Romeo and Juliet' as to range of thought and might of passion than is 'King Lear' above comparison with 'Macbeth'. Coleridge himself, the greatest master of the supernatural among all poets of all time, has left nothing so terrible or so beautiful. In lyric power and preterhuman imagination, unique alike in

sweep of conception and in harmony of detail, he is beyond comparison with any other poet on record: but Shakespeare has touched a deeper chord of terror and a finer chord of pity in a poem which grapples with the best and the worst imaginable possibilities of human character no less than with the most living and the most glorious aspects of the passing magnificence of nature. All the magnetism of tempest is in the very words and cadences of the verse: and this matchless music is but an accompaniment, as this matchless painting is but a background, to the deeper and more dreadful harmonies and revelations of humanity. If this poem be not the greatest work of man, it is at least on a level with any other that tradition may set against it or enthusiasm beside it. Take away or

tone down the tempest, and the tragedy of character would still remain, independent in its essence of the accident supplied by the wild night and the many miles of bushless waste. The conscious and conscienceless abandonment or self-devotion rather than self-surrender of Goneril and Regan to the instincts which they have just enough of practical intelligence to clothe if not to cover with some show of egotistic reasoning is as natural as the cruelty of their servile ministers ; even though lightning and rain be here as relentless as the willing and unwilling agents who nailed Prometheus to the cliff. The unspeakable villainy of Edmund is not less imaginable and credible in a rancorous and heartless sufferer under the brand of bastardy than is the cheerful gallantry of Falconbridge in a heroic

patriot who accepts it with a laugh and glorifies it by his acceptance. Against such a triad of most toad-spotted traitors no less heavenly counterpoise or contrast than could be given only by three such figures as those of Cordelia, Kent, and the Fool, could suffice to establish the ethical balance of the poem, and reconcile the sympathy or even sustain the endurance of the reader. The dramatic skill of the supreme dramatic rather than theatrical artist was never more triumphantly manifest than in the fusion and transfiguration of the stories here so naturally and so cunningly interwoven. To have turned the ugly and unmanageable legend of Cordelia's ultimate suicide in prison into the glory of a martyrdom unmatched for its tragic effect of terror and of pity, to have

made its inevitable consequence the agony which now strikes out not the reason but the life of her father, is the supreme feat of Shakespeare as a spiritual craftsman. On the other hand, we cannot honestly overlook the one great and grave oversight or flaw to be found in this tragic work: the sudden and inexplicable disappearance of Lear's only comrade and support in the first horror of his exposure as an outcast to the storm. That Casca should not meet us at Philippi must always have been felt as a disappointment and must always be remembered as a default: that the Fool should vanish with the tempest, never more to be thought of or mentioned by Lear or by Cordelia, can be neither explained nor excused by any possible audacity or felicity of conjecture. The most for-

tunate existence of a text from which two of the most priceless and incomparable scenes in the whole poem were struck out by the villainous editors of the folio precludes us from the otherwise natural and inevitable suspicion that another as brutal and treacherous excision may have deprived us of a third, in which we should have seen the last of the noble poor fellow whose suffering, in common with his own, was the means of his master's conversion from the royal egotism of a wilful and headstrong tyrant to the infinite sympathy of a high-minded and tender-hearted man with all sufferers under social negligence and misrule. In the noblest sense of an ambiguous if not indefinable term, the socialism of the revolutionary if not subversive sympathies which imbue with such thought-

ful passion the inspired insanity of the beggared and vagrant king can only rest unrecognized as Shakespeare's own prophetic and fervent faith by the blindest and deafest of misreaders.

The one tragedy ever written which can be set beside 'King Lear' as a comparable poem of the same kind as well as the same form is in all minor points unlike it. The eponymous hero is in every sense the hero indeed: and a nobler never lived in fiction or in less precious and immortal fact. The heroine, if not so heroically adorable as Cordelia, may probably seem to some readers a figure even more tenderly to be cherished in the inmost heart of all men's love and pity. She is not less patient and true: no other man, not even the creator of Antigone, and most assuredly no mortal woman, has ever

painted the courage of women, the distinctive property of their peculiar heroism, as Shakespeare has. And she is gentle almost beyond belief, submissive almost beyond sympathy: it is certainly impossible to imagine Cordelia, nor perhaps is it possible to imagine any other of Shakespeare's women, so 'obedient a lady', so resentless of such outrage, so ultra-Christian in her uncomplaining readiness to turn the other cheek. It is almost suggestive of something almost like a reversion to the mean mediaeval type of Griselda: of an ethical and spiritual subsidence or descent from Shakespeare's humanity to Chaucer's. But this impression is eclipsed if it cannot be effaced by the divine last scene which precedes her immolation. The fascination of her destroyer as a study

is as great as the fascination exercised on all who enjoyed his friendship by the cordial and genial company of that rough and bluff incarnation of straightforward, manly, soldierly loyalty known to all who knew him as honest Iago. He is as real, as fathomless, and as dangerous as the lake of Gaube—or any if there be any other whose bottom lies 'deeper than did ever plummet sound'. And only the depth and immensity of his evil intelligence could have sufficed to make it clear that the difference between a nature like Othello's and a nature capable of jealousy is as wide as the difference between light and darkness. The sense of wounded love and honour which impels Othello to sacrifice Desdemona could neither be felt nor imagined by a man born liable to so mean a passion as jealousy. Mis-

trust and suspicion could not exist in a spirit susceptible of such fearful and noble agony as Othello's. To those who confuse his heroic and heartbroken resentment at the ruin of his honour and betrayal of his love with the cowardly infirmity of an evil-minded egotist, it must follow that the conscious complacency of a consenting wittol would seem the natural quality of the ideal husband.

It would have been easy for the poet who chose for his subject the execution of Julius Caesar to assume the part of a Caesarist, and set before us Caius Cassius as a villain and Marcus Brutus as a murderer. It would have been no less easy for the author of 'King Lear' to have avoided the social question of luxury on this hand and misery on that which he saw fit to bring for-

ward with such passionate might of pity, such ardent appeal to justice, such intense fervour of protest against the iniquity of inequality in the structure and organism of society. The dullest of dullards not perfected and perverted by culture must therefore be able to apprehend, if not competent to comprehend, the expressed rather than implied sympathies of the poet. But the tragic and romantic story of Coriolanus could only be treated, if not altogether from the patrician point of view which misguides the hero to his destruction, in such fashion as to leave that magnificent rebel and ruthless enemy to his country the supreme figure of the tragedy. Shakespeare had here no choice. He could not but make the tribunes base and malignant. And he certainly has not glorified their

opponents beyond the requisite measure of poetic equity and dramatic need. Volumnia's counsel to her son as to his conduct and demeanour towards the citizens whom she desires him to delude has too strong a savour of the villainy connoted by the very name of Bonaparte to be conceivable as other than the dramatic utterance of a policy more obviously hateful and contemptible to Shakespeare than even the rampant and raging malignity of the mob. That Volumnia should afterwards be transfigured by the call of circumstance into the likeness of a patriotic heroine is no more unnatural or less in keeping than that the rebellious passion of revenge which possesses her son as with the impetuous insanity of a demoniac should break at last and melt under the divinely dissolving effect

of her superbly pathetic eloquence. The subtle superiority of high poetry to the very highest prose was never so convincingly and so conclusively shown as it now may be by the careful and studious collation, line by line, phrase by phrase, word by word, of Shakespeare's verse with the text of North's Plutarch. That unsurpassed if not incomparable prose he has simply done into verse with unequalled precision of fidelity: the one point of distinction between them is just an occasional touch of additional beauty or power or music or life of expression which no reader could have imagined possible to any poet. To have improved on such a model, to have bettered such an example, has never and could never have been possible to any hand but Shakespeare's.

The scheme of Shakespeare's third and last Roman play is so vast as to put it out of comparison with the others: the scene leaps and flies about with the trackless impulse of lightning from Africa to Europe and back, after a flash into Asia by the way: the number of its changes is as difficult to keep count of as the number of the characters involved. And there is no work of Shakespeare's more faultlessly harmonious in the final simplicity of its impression. The immense and living variety of subordinate figures throws only into fuller and more vivid relief the two which command them all. The simplest of dramatic structures is not more absolute in singleness of underlying aim and perfection of ultimate effect. This is the greatest love-poem of all time. Romeo and Juliet seem

but a couple of casual young amorists 'troubled with the green-sickness' if confronted with the sovereign pair who have 'the varying shore of the world' for background to their passion and platform for their action. The five fulsome acts of Dryden's drivel over the story of Antony and Cleopatra deal with nothing and make no pretence to deal with anything but mere sensual sentiment: and Shakespeare could put more of physical passion as well as of spiritual fervour into as many lines, into as many words, than all the soft erotic eloquence of his audacious competitor could command. At the close of Shakespeare's 'Antony and Cleopatra' the sense of superhuman humanity in the hand which has worked this miracle seems at once to suggest and to suppress all imaginable attempt

at thanksgiving for a gift beyond all imaginable aspiration of hope.

The very utmost power of that hand was put forth in the leading Shakespearean passages of the two tragic plays which were left at his death to be finished for the stage or completed for the study by other hands than Shakespeare's. The sublime and enigmatic fragment of a poem which rises from the social satire of an observant cynic into the raging rapture of an infuriated prophet was evidently patched and stitched up by some nobody whom no one need wish to identify as anybody. 'Timon of Athens', imperfect as a play, is hardly less imperfect as a poem. But no more plenary inspiration ever informed with everlasting life the utterance of human emotion than that which breathes in

the resonance of each word uttered by the noble and terrible hermit whose hatred of humanity was neither the contemptible contempt of a diabolatrous ascetic nor the envious virulence of a satiated and sickened libertine, but the sublime if deadly intoxication of a wholly righteous and half divine resentment: the passion that scourges money-changers out of the temple and protests against murderous hypocrisy in the last agony of death by fire.

The reader who cannot distinguish the hand of Shakespeare from the hand of Fletcher in the text of 'The Two Noble Kinsmen' stands confessed as 'a monster of an ass—an ass without an ear'. That excellent phrase of Shakespeare's greatest critic, and England's greatest poet since the passing of Milton, might well have been re-

served for the judicial dunces whose misfortune in being born blind and deaf is topped and capped by their crowning misfortune of having not been also born dumb. It is permissible and natural to conjecture that Shakespeare, after having been moved in spirit to pour out all his wealth of stormy harmonies, to put forth all his might and majesty of passion, in the lightnings and thunders of the godlike wrath of Timon, may have resigned the project of beating out into the shape of a finished poem or building up into the structure of a perfect play a scheme so singular and so lurid in the magnificence of its suggestion, the monochrome of its colour, the monotone of its music. It is impossible for any eye or ear not sealed at birth against all sense of style, all perception of poetry, not to see

and hear when Shakespeare ends and Fletcher begins, when Fletcher ends and Shakespeare begins again, in the tragedy based on the poem reared by Chaucer on a foundation supplied by Boccaccio. Four such names were surely never brought together for the composition of a single masterpiece: but it is as certain and as evident that Fletcher's part was built on Shakespeare's as that Shakespeare's work was founded on Chaucer's and Chaucer's on Boccaccio's. The matchless beauty of the opening, with the unmistakable music and the intimate love of homely countryside flowers which would suffice to declare the author of the bridal song, is followed up by such natural and divine profusion of pathetic and heroic poetry as all the sweet and spontaneous effluence of Fletcher's can but serve to

set off by contrast. Nothing can explain the incompletion of this great romantic tragedy but the death of Shakespeare while still at work on it; the death of Shakespeare at the age of fifty-three.

It is as hopeless to hope as it would be arrogant to assume that any tribute of praise or thanksgiving can glorify with any further glory the name that is above every other for variety in supremacy of powers and unity in diversity of genius. Of poetry pure and simple, imaginative and sublime, there is no master who has left us more: of humour there is no master who has left us as much of so high a quality and so deep an insight: of women as of men there is no poet who has created so many so surely endowed with everlasting life. All that can be known of

manhood, of womanhood, and of childhood, he knew better than any other man ever born. It is not only the crowning glory of England, it is the crowning glory of mankind, that such a man should ever have been born as William Shakespeare.

ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE.